

28 May 2006  
Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Precious, Parting, Comforting Words”

Text: John 17:11b-19 (Acts 1:15-26; 1 John 4:13-21)

*(Thanks to Rev. Wm. Cwirla for some of the thoughts and words contained in this sermon.)*

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Parting words of loved ones are precious. A husband telling his wife he loves her before entering dangerous surgery. A mother telling her children “Take care of Dad” before she dies. We hang onto those words. We remember them. Because they show us what is deep down in that person’s heart. What really matters to them. For at a time like that, you don’t waste words by saying what isn’t important.

Today, that is what we heard from Jesus. Precious, parting words. He is in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is about to be arrested and parted from His disciples. Tomorrow He is going to die. And so He prays. Not for Himself, but for His disciples, for His Church. Because that is what is in His heart. They are what matters to Him. For this is why He came – for them. For us. And so in His final hours, He doesn’t waste words by saying what isn’t important. He prays for what really matters. He prays for what we really need. And what He prays is what we really need to hear.

So what does Jesus pray? Well **first**, He prays for our protection, for the Father to keep us. He knows we’ll need it, for He knows the enemy well. He tangled with him in the wilderness. And He knew that the devil would give us no rest, attacking us *from without* with false doctrine and persecution; and attacking us *from within* with doubts and fears. And so Jesus prays for us, because He knows that the enemy is more than we, on our own, can handle. Adam and Eve – *without* the corruption of sin – couldn’t handle him; why do we think we can fare any better? And we don’t. For the truth is, we aren’t even really persecuted as Christians, and yet we buckle under the smallest pressure from those around us, opting to keep our mouths shut instead of speak, wanting to blend in instead of appearing different. False doctrine is a sneaky enemy from without, rarely attacking the church head on, but most often creeping in through the back door, and often disguised as pragmatism, outreach, or relevance. And doubts and fears, do I even need to go there? How often do they overwhelm us, despite the promises of God? Despite His faithful and consistent track record? ***Father, keep them, protect them.*** They’ll need it.

And has He? Well, it's been some 2,000 and *the Church is still here!* 2,000 years of attacks by the devil and of some of the grossest mismanagement by men in recorded history, *and the Church is still here.* She has survived dictators and democracies, hostile and friendly governments, popes, conventions, and voters meetings. *And the Church is still here.* What began with a rag tag group of 120 men and women has grown into a Church that quite literally embraces the world and runs across national and ethnic boundaries. Neither greed, traitor, or scandal could bring her down. In those first days, she had no programs, no publishing houses, no buildings, no financial security, no endowments, no schools, no bureaucracy. Her leaders were martyred, her followers scattered and driven underground. *And the Church is still here . . .* and there can be very little doubt why. Jesus prayed for it, and the Father did it. And is still doing it. ***Holy Father, protect them, keep them, in your name.***

Notice what Jesus does not pray there: keep them with your power, might, and strength! No. *By your name.* Which seems a very weak weapon, for what's in a name? We'd rather have the political strength to get what we need done, and the financial strength to give us the means. But none of that has kept the Church. There was a time when the Church had all of that. And we're still striving for it, aren't we? . . . But that has all come and gone, and shifted hands and parties. And through it all – *or maybe better: in spite of it all!* – God has always worked His power in what looks weak to the world. *By His Name.* The Name He revealed to Moses in the burning bush. The Name He revealed to the world in Jesus Christ. The Name which healed the sick, raised the dead, and cast out demons. The Name which showed its hidden power by dying on the cross. . . . What's in a name? There may be nothing in *our* names – no power or strength; but when the name is God's Name, His holy Name, it is the power to save. It is His signature of ownership. It is His promise to be merciful and gracious. And so when you have His Name, you have it all.

*And you have His Name,* for God revealed and gave His Name to you in your Baptism. In those waters, He marked you as His own with the sign of the cross, forgave your sins, and sealed you with His Holy Spirit. And so we invoke His Name, and as His children call upon it in every trouble. We worship in His Name. We pray, praise, and give thanks in His Name. And you are kept in His Name. Jesus prayed for it, and the Father did it. And is still doing it. He has since the beginning, and you can be sure He won't stop now!

But protection isn't all that Jesus prays for. He also prays that thus protected by our Father, that we be made holy: ***“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”*** Sanctify, sanctification – those are the fancy words for holiness, for the holy-ing work of the Holy Spirit, given to us. **And so with these words, Jesus prays not that we be taken out of**

**the world** (as He says), **but rather that the world be taken out of us!** That we not only be protected in the world, but that the world in us – the sin, the hatred, the falsehood, the anger, the lust, the greed, the pride – all the ugliness and blackness that lives in our hearts that we don't like to admit is there, be removed, and a *new man* emerge and arise. A new man, *different* than the old man. A Christ man, not to escape the world, but to live in the world, with the Name of God upon us, and the truth of His Word in us.

And for this Jesus not only prays, **He did it.** For He is the new man, the sinless man, who becomes the old man, the sinful man, in our place, and is condemned and crucified on the cross, so that we who are old might be made new. *To take the world out of us.* So that we could be born again and made holy through the forgiveness of our sin. And this, as Jesus prays, is done through His Word of truth. His Word which reveals to us the awful truth of our sin, but which even more reveals to us the wonderful truth of our Saviour. Of His love. Of His gift of salvation. Of His life and death **for you.** So that the old man, dying in repentance, might be raised a new man in forgiveness and new life. And that new life, begun by the Word in Holy Baptism, nourished with the Word in the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion, and strengthened and sustained by His Word of Holy Absolution, is working in you. He doesn't take you out of this world, but gives you life in this world. Life to live. In holiness, not sin. In service, not greed. In love, not selfishness.

For you see, Jesus doesn't want you to have only eternal life, but life here, life now. To see this life not as something we just have to get through, but as a gift already now! *As the first day of the rest of your life.* Sin and Satan seek to rob us of this life, and the result is what we see around us – a culture of death and discontent, of isolation and idolatry. **But Jesus has come to restore what was lost.** To give us life instead of death, joy instead of gloom, and forgiveness instead of guilt. That protected from Satan and made holy from sin, we may live in this world as God intended – and live as one. One with Him, and one with each other. And in *true* unity. Not in the modern day way of oneness – of unity in diversity, of agreeing to disagree, of you have your truth and I have mine, and we'll all just get along. No. Jesus prays, ***“Father, keep them . . . that they may be one, even as we are one.”*** Even as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons in one God, so may the Church be one. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. (Eph 4:5-6)

Such unity, such holiness, is going to meet with opposition, no doubt. From the devil, from the world, and from the old man who still lives in each of us. There will be struggles and problems in this life we have been given to live. But it is exactly for this struggle that Jesus prays for us. Not that we be taken from it – but that we be protected and made holy in it. And for this Jesus is *still* praying. For His work, and the work of

His holy-ing Spirit, isn't done, but continues in us.

So remember that, remember these words and this prayer, and hang onto these precious words of your Saviour. **These precious, parting words.** When you doubt, when you despair, when the future seem bleak. When the Church seems to be in turmoil, when sin seems to be gaining the upper hand, when the old evil foe seems strong. When you feel so weak, so helpless, and so small. Remember who it is who is praying for you. Remember who it is who is working for you. Remember who it is who hung on the cross for you and rose from the dead for you. Remember who won the victory, and who lost. Remember the mercy, love, and faithfulness of your Saviour, which never changes. Remember that all that you need, you have; and all that He promised, He gives.

And so take heart. Remember, repent, and most of all receive. The gifts and goodness, the love and forgiveness, of your Saviour. For while you may be in the devil's crosshairs in this world, you are also in the crosshairs of Jesus' prayer. *And which is greater?*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.